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Enhancing professional development for Third Space roles: reflections on the added value of Learning Circles

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Abstract

This paper explores how Learning Circles can support higher education staff in navigating the complexities of contemporary educational landscapes with greater confidence, creativity, and efficacy. It presents qualitative research rooted in the three-year Erasmus+ project CIRCLET, involving five European universities. Learning Circles were implemented as a core component of professional development programmes, aiming to foster quality integration of Community Engaged Research and Learning (CERL) in academic practice. Drawing on a collaborative autoethnographic research design, we reflected on our experiences as Learning Circle designers, facilitators, and participants to identify manifestations of professional growth emanating from our project activities. We build on four different Learning Circle examples, analysing their features through a Third Spaces lens. We demonstrate that Learning Circles have the potential to create agentic, distributed, and adaptive professional learning spaces, enabling participating staff in

reimagining their professional space, so that they feel better prepared to assume the hybrid roles and responsibilities that practices of engagement typically entail. We put forward a number of guiding principles for Learning Circle facilitators, emphasising the importance of promoting inquiry-led approaches, embedded in day-to-day practice, fostering active participation and critical reflection on one's positionality.

Keywords: learning circles; community engaged research and learning; boundary work; third space professionalism.

Introduction

In recent decades, higher education has been marked by significant changes, including massification, globalisation, digitisation, reduced funding, increased marketisation, and competition (Callender et al., 2020). These developments have also changed the way Higher Education Institutions allocate roles and responsibilities among their staff members. As a result, the career paths, professional sense-making, and security of those working in higher education have undergone significant shifts (Veles et al., 2023). A growing body of literature addresses the challenges faced by university staff regarding their professional self-image, -confidence, and -direction (Brew et al., 2018; Hunter, 2020; Whitchurch, 2023). In response to these challenges, it has become increasingly important for Higher Education Institutions to develop more sophisticated professional support initiatives.

In this paper, we argue that the concept of Third Space professionals is pertinent not only to Whitchurch's (2013; 2018) notion of the liminal space between professional services and academic staff, but also to the emerging professional roles, practices, and identities at the intersection between academia and society. We examine how one level of Third Space professionals – professional services staff and academics – can collaborate to design Learning Circles that support another level of Third Space professionals – academics involved in Community Engaged Research and Learning (CERL) – in their professional development, while also promoting more empowering educational practices.

Despite the significant expansion of professional development models and offerings for higher education staff (e.g. Stevens et al., 2024), the emphasis remains predominantly on individual growth and traditionally defined academic roles and responsibilities (Hains-

Wesson and Rahman, 2023). Yet, it appears that role ambiguity and confusion can negatively impact professional practice, performance, and satisfaction (Deng et al., 2022). Additionally, research indicates that environments promoting collaboration and interaction with peers enhance professional fulfilment, efficacy, and growth (De Rijdt et al., 2013; Steinert et al., 2016). In this sense, we follow Sinnayah and colleagues (2023) in their call for more collegial professionalisation modalities, which also fit well with the fundamentally collaborative philosophies behind CERL. Focusing on Learning Circle formats, we will explore in what way such professional learning initiatives better prepare university staff – both *academic and non-academic* – for the diverse boundary roles and responsibilities they are required to assume as Third Space professionals.

The questions we explore are: what role do Learning Circles play in supporting community engaged academics to critically examine their educational practices and explore creative alternatives in teaching and learning? To what extent do Learning Circles enable participants and facilitators to critically reflect on their professional roles and responsibilities? And, what are the benefits and challenges of implementing Learning Circles as a core component of professional development programs? We structure this paper as follows: first, we situate the context of our research and explain the theoretical concepts that underpin this study. Next, we present our data collection and analysis methods. We then present the main findings and discuss their implications for advancing professional growth and wellbeing in higher education.

Theoretical background

Framing community engagement as boundary practice

Our study investigates how university staff working at the intersection of academia and society can be better supported in understanding and navigating the complexity, ambiguity, and diversity of these professional roles. We focus on Community Engaged Research and Learning (CERL), a collaborative approach where individuals from diverse backgrounds unite to tackle real-world challenges, fostering both personal and collective capacity for change. In practice, CERL involves students partnering with communities on mutually beneficial, curriculum-integrated projects, supervised by faculty and co-designed for both student learning and community advancement (Bates et al., 2022). These engaged practices are dynamic, social, and interactive learning processes involving multiple

stakeholders. Aligned with these principles, our perspective integrates constructivism, experiential learning, and critical pedagogies. We view CERL as a 'boundary practice', capable of inspiring novel perspectives by transcending the confined spaces of established disciplines, traditional structures and sectors, a diversity of learning experiences, encounters, and forms of knowledge (Moriau et al., 2022).

Community engagement requires academic staff to move outside the comfort of their space within the university, and to engage with practitioners, service users, and communities beyond its walls, whose language, knowledge, and experience may be quite different from their own and that of their discipline. They enter spaces and ‘territories in which they are unfamiliar and, to some extent unqualified’ (Suchman, 1994, p.25) and then ‘face the challenge of negotiating and combining ingredients from different contexts to achieve hybrid situations’ (Engeström et al., 1995, p.319). When involving their students, faculty members must navigate additional relationship dynamics. These complex and sometimes daunting interactions are often supported by professional services staff who mediate or broker these relationships. Together, they enter this transitional space, developing their roles and identities as Third Space professionals. We explore how Learning Circles can provide a supportive environment in this context.

Looking at Learning Circles through a Third Space lens

Broadly speaking, Learning Circles can be described as intimate gatherings where individuals come together to delve into a common area of interest (Aksim, 2005). While their practical manifestations can vary, Learning Circles commonly feature a peer-supported and highly interactive structure (Sinnayah et al., 2023), bringing together participants at regular intervals to support each other by engaging in critical discussion and reflection on shared issues (Sutherland et al., 2020). The primary aim is to empower participants in developing new practices or laying out action plans applicable to their respective work contexts (Noble et al., 2005). There is also an expectation that participants can critically explore their experiences in a safe (Lewis, 2002) and supportive environment (Little, 2002), without fear of being judged or evaluated (Dajani, 2014). We worked with a uniquely varied kind of Learning Circle, which was at different times transnational, trans-institutional, and transdisciplinary, and often online. This led us to explore the rich potential of Learning Circles as professional learning spaces, using Third Space theories as an analytical lens.

The Third Space concept, initially introduced by Lefebvre (1991), emphasises how a space goes beyond its physical features and intended use, for it is always experienced, changed, and appropriated by its inhabitants. The concept has been adopted by social theorists aiming to explore social relationships and the impact of diversity and difference ('otherness') thereon. Bhabha (1994) applied the concept to the liminal, or bordering, spaces in which members of diverse communities collaborate, leading to transformative interactions. Subsequently, the Third Space concept has been used to explore the intersections and disconnections in diverse social domains, with an aim of moving beyond traditional binary frameworks (Soja, 1996). In higher education research, the term has been used to examine liminal and marginal phenomena characterising contemporary teaching and learning environments. The common thread in these studies is that they conceptualise Third Space as processes/locations where traditional role definitions are blurred, and professional identities become ambiguous (Smith et al., 2021).

Lubicz-Nawrocka (2019), amongst others, argues that Third Space environments and interactions help challenge the status quo of traditional structures, processes, and ways of working in higher education, thereby offering spaces for renewal. Potter and McDougall (2017) also suggest that they can help push against traditional hierarchies when there is an exchange of ‘porous expertise… between students’ mediated cultures and the culture of the classroom… [when] the epistemological frames of reference for ‘what counts’ as knowledge are genuinely co-constructed’ (p.85). We analyse these in light of our research findings below, focusing on three topics emerging in Third Space literature. ‘Exchange of porous expertise’ emphasises blending diverse perspectives, forms of knowledge, and expertise, fostering an environment where various roles and identities intersect. ‘Navigation of power differentials’ involves actively addressing power imbalances to promote equity and inclusivity. Lastly, ‘Moving beyond established practice’ is about reevaluating norms and conventional practices. We explore how these principles were or could have been reflected in the Learning Circles, guided by the reflection prompts summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Third Space themes and prompts used to discuss experiences and observations across Learning Circles. (Source: authors)

Third Space themes	Reflection prompts
Exchange of porous expertise: interaction of diverse perspectives, with an aim to develop more nuanced and/or robust understandings and explanations.	*What did we do to enable/support diversity and cross-context experience-sharing? What more could we have done to broaden perspectives, narratives and practices?*
Navigating power differentials: exploring and addressing power imbalances to promote equity, reciprocity and inclusivity.	*What hierarchies and inequities did we come across? What guiding principles or practices did we adopt to navigate power structures? What challenged us in this process? How did we handle the challenges? What could we have done differently?*
Moving beyond established practice: reconsidering dominant ways of working, with an aim to develop more effective, rewarding, and just practices.	*What did we do to challenge traditional ways of working, dominant norms and expectations in academia? What did we do to explore alternative operating modes? Where did we fall short?*

Methods

Context of this study

The 'Curriculum Innovation through Research with Communities: Learning circles of Educators and Technology' (CIRCLET) Erasmus + project ran from 2019-2022. The project was led by Queen's University Belfast and partners were Corvinus University of Budapest, Technological University Dublin, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, and Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. The main goal was to support university staff aiming to embed CERL in their academic programmes and curricula. This included two iterations of an online Continuing Professional Development module worth 5 ECTS, two rounds of year-long Learning Circles at each participating university, as well as an international Learning Circle each year. Through these activities, the project worked with 104 academics to redesign 53 modules/courses. Over 3,000 students were supported to complete 187

projects with 165 community organisations. Reflection and collaborative learning were embedded in both the consortium and project activities.

Among the five universities involved in the CIRCLET project, four embraced similar approaches to the Learning Circles, making them suitable for comparative analysis. Each Learning Circle involved 5 to 12 staff members and regular whole-group sessions lasting 2-3 hours, interspersed by smaller-group reflection activities (referred to as Triads from now on). The broad outlines of both whole-group sessions and Triads were collaboratively designed by the consortium and adapted to the local context by each partner. For a more detailed description of the Learning Circle designs, see Appendix 1.

Research method

This study employs a collaborative autoethnographic approach. Autoethnography is a form of qualitative research in which the author(s) use(s) self-reflective writing and other personal data to explore and interpret life-experiences and connect them with a wider socio-cultural context (Chang, 2008). Autoethnographic research methods gained momentum in educational contexts, particularly through the pandemic, where researchers and educators spanned global contexts to explore different ways of working together (Dickson-Deane et al., 2022), seeking to bring together diverse scholars' perspectives foregrounding critical reflection as data (Burleigh and Burm, 2022). Adams et al. (2014) propose that 'when we do autoethnography, we look *inward* – into our identities, thoughts, feelings, experiences – and *outward* – into our relationships, communities and cultures' (p.46). Key tenets include dialogic and interrogating conversations, a space where researchers' voices are explicit through their lived experiences, and differences are used as strength (Burleigh and Burm, 2022). We chose this as methodological framework for our study, because of its focus on capturing personal experience and audience engagement (Adams et al., 2014). Like other scholars using this approach, we systematically explored the triad of people—situations—contexts through reflective dialogue and knowledge co-construction (Roy and Uekusa, 2020).

We are seven women working in 'Third Space' functions with diverse disciplinary backgrounds and professional roles, working in different European universities. We comprise mediators, academics, and educational developers. As Learning Circle designers, facilitators, and participants, we regularly met throughout the project timeline to

discuss design choices, supportive interventions, learnings, failures, and successes, in effect forming our own Learning Circle. Reflections emerged from the discussions, guided by our own hybrid professional identities. These were documented in shared meeting notes. Informal conversations, peer interviews, and document analysis complemented the reflective journalling to provide a multifaceted perspective on the Learning Circle dynamics and outcomes. We used the 'thinking with theory' method (Jackson and Mazzei, 2013), integrating theory, research findings, collected data, and our perspectives. We undertook three main activities: (i) reading previously collected data (reflection diaries, feedback forms, qualitative interviews) to understand participants' experiences; (ii) identifying and analysing Third Space characteristics relevant to our Learning Circles approaches; and (iii) reflecting on our experiences (including the positionality – cultural, organisational – of each researcher), observations, and learning. This iterative process of (re)interpreting data – doing and (un)doing in the process of becoming (Jackson and Mazzei, 2013) – provided insights into the potentialities and pitfalls of Learning Circles as Third Spaces, supporting lecturers to embed CERL in their educational practice as well as promoting professional awareness and agency.

Results

In this section, we reflect on the experiences and insights gained in setting up the described Learning Circles, detailing their design principles and the facilitatory interventions that we implemented to optimise their (expected and unexpected) learning potential.

Exchange of porous expertise

Our Learning Circles adopted diverse strategies to foster fruitful cross-boundary encounters, interactions, and learnings. A pivotal tool in this process was the Triad work, carefully designed to encourage experience/perspective sharing among participants with diverse backgrounds during small-group activities. Triads were intentionally composed to encompass a broad spectrum of disciplines, varied levels of experience in the context of CERL, and a balanced representation of genders (as far as possible, given that applicants to join the Learning Circles were overwhelmingly female academic staff). In the pre-work and discussions leading up to the Triad sessions, participants were prompted to reflect on

their personal goals, preferred participation modalities, areas of expertise and development, and encouraged to openly share these insights with the group. Beyond individual introspection, collaborative perspective-sharing and reflection was encouraged. The aim was to tap into a diverse array of interests and motivations among the Learning Circle participants. One of the participants put this as follows: 'The biggest benefit for me has been the opportunity to build collaborative relationships with peers in different disciplines, especially colleagues in my Triad. This opened my eyes to the commonalities of challenges we face and common solutions that we were moving towards.'

In addition, efforts were made to accommodate differences in participants' availability, working schemes, and calendars. This was achieved through a blend of synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities, on-site sessions, and online pre/post-tasks. We found it important to explore the use of diverse learning resources (such as text-based materials, videos, and site visits), and we actively encouraged participants, students, and partners to co-host or facilitate sessions, regardless of institutional roles and hierarchies. Informal learning opportunities, like pre-session coffee check-ins and post-session lunches or drinks, played a positive role in enhancing Third Space features within the Learning Circles. The dialogic and reflective nature of the Learning Circles not only exposed participants to a range of CERL approaches and interpretations, but also pushed them to consciously compare and position their own aspirations and practices. This process included navigating voices opposing CERL, challenging participants to engage with a broader perspective beyond their individual experiences.

Navigating power differentials

In scoping the project, we acknowledged that participants may have different levels of power (perceived or otherwise) to implement CERL. We identified diverse influencing factors, such as the type of institution (research vs. teaching-led), level of acceptance of CERL in the academic discipline or department, and the career stage of participants. In order to address this, we provided participants with a range of literature, both theoretical and empirical, enabling them to explore how CERL could benefit them in their educational practice. Alongside, we used our own deep knowledge of our institutions to support participants to navigate their unique contexts. This extended to working to persuade senior staff to embrace CERL, and supporting participants to both identify and reinforce its alignment with institutional missions and strategic objectives. Participant feedback and

observation of the changes they implemented suggested that in some cases this improved their ability to more effectively navigate power imbalances within their academic spheres and beyond. However, some unforeseen elements emerged during the process, for example the particular challenges for those on short-term or part-time contracts who were much less embedded in their department or area, exacerbated by the ways in which home working during Covid-19 inhibited relationship-building with colleagues.

We began to understand this in terms of how participants perceived their agency, and to some degree their safety. Restrictions on agency included the level of expertise (both content-wise as well as in terms of pedagogical competences), professional requirements for curriculum-change, and lack of structural support. One common factor amongst all participants – regardless of position or discipline – was lack of time. Some participants had a module based around their own expert area and flexibility to embed some form of CERL relatively easily, whilst others were teaching less-familiar topics and felt less able to handle the inherent uncertainty that comes with supervising dynamic CERL projects. Those on precarious contracts (who often carried very heavy teaching workloads) had less opportunity to make changes than those in permanent secure positions, and even less time. Some in secure positions experienced restrictions in the form of requirements of professional accreditation bodies. Others faced active or passive opposition from colleagues to bring change to the curriculum. Most participants chose to initially make smaller changes in teaching practice which did not require permission from others. Some were able to collaborate with colleagues and build alliances for change at a strategic level.

Moving beyond established practices

The primary aim of our Learning Circles was to build a sense of safety and thereby bolster lecturers' confidence and capacity to bring about change in their curricula by deepening CERL practices. As well as the tangible implementation of practices relating to curriculum change mentioned above, this inherently involved challenging norms and expectations. A shared experience emerging during the peer-group reflections was that the Learning Circles had played a crucial role in creating a ‘Third Space’, supporting the co-creation of knowledge, and posing a challenge to existing institutional structures at the levels of workflow and disciplinary expertise. The creation of both formal and informal networks within and across Learning Circles had been an important lever in this regard. Learning Circles served as transformative spaces helping to challenge traditional roles in academia

and fostering a safe and brave environment for participants. One of the lecturers who had been involved framed it as follows: ‘The project provided me with the opportunity to engage with colleagues across [my university]. In order to get feedback, I had to summate (which was difficult) what I do, why I do it and consider it in the context of student learning and engagement. And also, from the perspective of the community. Engaging and getting feedback from colleagues from other disciplines is most beneficial […] Arguably there are a number of times when it appears daunting. Though the end result through student and community feedback is worth it.’

Participants in the Learning Circles engaged in formal reflection at regular intervals as a way to move beyond established practices. Structured prompts were provided, aiding those unfamiliar with reflective practices and demonstrating how they could foster this capacity in their students. Local facilitators positioned themselves as co-learners. This approach encouraged the sharing of vulnerability, facilitated by the diverse mix of disciplines within the Learning Circles, which we feel may have reduced a sense of competition between participants as they were largely working with colleagues outside their own department. While the supportive nature of Learning Circles encouraged open sharing, some instances of experienced academics using the full-group sessions to showcase their own expertise risked undermining the safety of the space, especially for less-experienced participants. Facilitators navigated this challenge by providing individualised support tailored to participants' unique circumstances, strengths, and needs. Individual meetings, conducted either before or in between the group sessions, allowed for a deeper exploration of expectations and motivations.

We repeatedly introduced community partners into the workshops as expert guest contributors, and the participating lecturers respected and developed this construction of their roles. In one of the early Learning Circle sessions, the community partner listened and gave constructive feedback to the lecturers on their ideas for what competencies they would like their students to develop for CERL, and particularly for partnership working. After the community partner left the session, one of the lecturers expressed relief that the partner had been invested in the students’ development as well as in progressing their own organisation’s goals. The lecturer said that they had been feeling intimidated about meeting and working with a community partner. They were afraid that the community partner would have high expectations of what the students would do, which they weren’t sure the students could deliver as they weren’t professionals. Much of the literature relating

to CERL paints community partners as needing support to navigate the intimidating environment of higher education and academic expertise, but here an academic new to CERL needed support to overcome feelings of intimidation about working with a professional in the community sector. In this way, Learning Circles become a place where traditional hierarchies and modi operandi can indeed be challenged.

Discussion

In this article, we approached higher education staff working in the field of community engagement as Third Space professionals, for they need to mediate between a variety of contexts: institutional, disciplinary, conceptual, cultural, linguistic, spatio-temporal, and more. Expanding on the insights of our study, we argue that Learning Circles can be a supportive tool in this regard. In this concluding section, we highlight three overarching features that emerged as important during our conversations (see Appendix 2 for a schematic concept map).

Learning Circles as agentic spaces

Agentic spaces refer to environments that empower individuals to take initiative, exercise autonomy, and actively shape their experiences. In this context, our Learning Circles emerged as dynamic spaces that place participants at the centre of their professional (development) efforts, and ensure embeddedness of the proposed activities in their day-to-day contexts, consistent with previous research (Sinnayah et al., 2023). Drawing on Pennington's (2007) concept of 'autoethnographic pedagogy', we recognise the importance of critically examining personal beliefs, assumptions, and aspirations in this regard. During our post-project reflections, we felt there was scope for improvement through creating resources and activities that guide participants through a deep exploration of their disciplinary, cultural, and personal assumptions. Engaging in such reflective exercises to understand one's position and sharing them with others helped our Learning Circle participants to ground their developing CERL practice in a better understanding of their professional selves and contexts. This, we believe, supported them in defining where they had 'room for manoeuvre', as articulated by Annala and colleagues (2023, p.1311), and aided them to identify and implement opportunities for agency and change.

Learning Circles as distributed spaces

A distributed space refers to an environment where learning and interaction occur across various locations, contexts, or networks, rather than being confined to a single, clearly marked setting. Learning Circles, as we observed, foster exchange, challenge, and analysis of diverse viewpoints and experiences. Acting as connective hubs, they bridge diverse professional contexts and realities. By shaping these distributed learning environments, Learning Circles enrich professional perspectives and encourage participants to explore new horizons, skillfully navigating and challenging existing norms and structures (Beyes and Michels, 2011). Our Learning Circles directly addressed power differentials between extra- and intra-academic parties, and only to a lesser extent touched upon the inter-institutional power dynamics. Yet, in order to effect change, academics need to devote time to understanding where power actually lies (which differs in each university and even within each department), situate themselves within this field, and identify allies that allow them to develop capacity for action. Incorporating this approach formally into the Learning Circle designs, we believe, holds a promise for fostering a stronger sense of solidarity among individuals who perceive themselves as fighting solitary battles and for enriching peer learning on this issue. In this regard, we echo the sentiments of Veles and colleagues (2023) who advocate for a reassessment of professionalism and the value of championing complex collaborations in academia. We feel that this asks for an ongoing critical examination of power dynamics throughout the process of designing, running, and supporting Learning Circles.

Learning Circles as adaptive spaces

Adaptive space refers to an environment or context where individuals or groups can experiment, innovate, and cross traditional boundaries, allowing for dynamic growth and collaboration. In our study context, the Learning Circles acted as adaptive spaces, encouraging participants to subtly push their professional boundaries, aligning with the concept of *inquiry as stance* proposed by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009). Fundamental to this attitude is that they '…pose problems, identify discrepancies between theories and practices, challenge common routines, draw on the work of others for generative frameworks, and attempt to make visible much of that which is taken for granted about teaching and learning' (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2021, p.101). The learnings gained

throughout this process resulted in a ripple effect of gradual change, through which the Learning Circles developed in adaptive professional spaces, promoting continuous professional learning and growth (Bohle Carbonell et al., 2014). Here again, we identified a point of improvement. Whilst consortium partners explicitly positioned themselves as co-learners and co-facilitators, each Learning Circle had a predefined structure and purpose. Breaking through this approach by jointly planning session goals and approaches with the various participants could offer an opportunity to be bolder and create deeper future expertise.

Overall, the Learning Circles we studied were found to support both academic and professional staff in building community, engaging in reflective dialogues, and rethinking their professional practice and space. Combining the agentic, distributive, and adaptive nature of these Learning Circles created dynamic environments, which allowed participants to exchange porous expertise, navigate power differentials, and move beyond established practice. We (as local co-facilitators) experienced the value of being surrounded by supportive peers within the consortium to work through the moments of discomfort and confusion this entails. The interim consortium meetings and the collaborative autoethnographic approach of this study proved to be highly valuable in this regard. They allowed us to exchange experiences – including successes, failures, frustrations, and worries – and created an environment for insightful learning, building on supportive conversations with peers. In essence, we found that both the Learning Circles and the project team functioned as Third Spaces promoting collaborative professional learning and growth. Our work indicates that Learning Circle approaches can be useful for both academic and support professionals, students and community partners, junior and senior staff members, and they can be applied across disciplines and in a diversity of higher education contexts.

In line with others' findings (e.g. Custer, 2014; Koay, 2023), we believe the autoethnographic approach of this study is a valuable complement to more empirical research in the field of professional learning. While our analysis is primarily based on personal experiences, reflections, and interpretations, the collective process of data (re)evaluation and cross-checking with existing literature ensures a necessary level of robustness. Future research can draw on the themes that emerged in this study and consider deeper analysis based on feedback and reflections from Learning Circle participants. We are conscious that a limitation of our work is that this project ran during

the period when Covid regulations significantly impacted on our ability to organise our envisaged in-person activities. Whilst our experimental online Learning Circles were much more successful than we initially anticipated, it is difficult to assess whether in-person activities, in particular with community partners (both for participants and for their students), would have further enriched the learning experiences. Within the confines of the project, we also did not have capacity to fully assess the impact of the activities on student engagement and learning, and this is another limitation of our approach that would benefit from further research in order to address the transferability and wider applicability of the Learning Circle model.

Conclusion

During the three-year project underpinning this study, Learning Circles emerged as dynamic forces, capable of (re)directing participants' professional self-image and practice. They acted as catalysts for development and transformation, promoting enthusiasm and preparedness for community engagement, and critical reflection on the beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions that shape professional practice and direction. As participants immersed themselves into both the theory and practice of Community Engaged Research and Learning together with students and community partners, the Learning Circle sessions created space for a reconsideration of professional roles and strivings, enriching their professional imaginations and horizons. Our analysis points to the importance of inquiry-based approaches, embedded in an environment where everyone feels safe to share personal experiences and critically reflect on their own position and perspectives. Participants benefitted from the collective intelligence, leading to more informed and effective CERL implementation. The Learning Circles also provided them with a structured space for collaborative problem-solving, which fostered a culture of mutual learning and continuous improvement. We hope the results and insights from our research can inspire others to further explore and diversify the landscape of engaged academic practices.

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Licence

Appendix

Appendix 1. Characterising features of Learning Circles (LC) covered in this paper. (Source: authors).

Dimension	Description	Common/ Varied	Explanation of Similarities and Differences
Learning Circle Characteristics			
Goal	Professional development of lecturers to embed community engagement into existing courses	Common	All LC processes were set up with the shared goal of promoting CERL via engaging and upskilling lecturers. The focus was on transforming pre-existing courses with the potential for CERL, and to avoid the significant obstacles associated with making major changes to curricula – e.g. =new course validation.
Format	Facilitated peer learning	Common	All LCs were designed to facilitate learning with and from each other, to build a community of practice, facilitated by CERL support teams. A key aim was to create diverse groups in terms of (1) level of teaching experience, (2) level of CERL experience, (3) disciplinary backgrounds. Processes emphasised equipping lecturers to reflect on practice, and to support student reflection. Approaches (e.g. experiential learning), tools for reflection (various exercises, reflective journals, etc.) varied.
Duration	1 or 2 semesters	Varied	The 1st semester process was designed collaboratively, the 2nd semester process was left open to be shaped by the feedback and needs of the local participants by the local facilitators.
Group Size	Whole group + Triads	Common & Varied	All LCs involved both group sizes. The size of small groups varied based on the local number of participants, there were pairs, triads and quads.
Delivery Modes	Onsite - Online - Blended	Common & Varied	In the first year all LC activities were online due to COVID restrictions, in the second year one was fully online, one fully in person and the other two were a mix of both. All international activities were fully online.
Resources	Readings, Videos, Testimonials, Site Visits	Common & Varied	Some core resources were used across all LCs with additional materials made available according to interests of each LC. Two LCs hosted site visits to community partners in the second year of the project
Learning Circle Participants			
Academic staff	As learners, experts and critical friends.	Common & Varied	All LCs involved academic staff members as active LC participants, learners, experts and critical friends. The number of participants, their level of engagement, disciplinary backgrounds and institutional positions varied.
Educational development and support staff	Involved (1) as designers and facilitators of LC processes, (2) as brokers and support for CERL projects, (3) as resource persons: guest speakers and co-facilitators for course redesign, advisory board members	Common & Varied	All LCs involved Science Shops, university units supporting CERL. The LC processes were initiated, designed and facilitated by them. Level and type of involvement of other support staff varied from being an inherent part of designing and facilitating the LCs, to provide support in a certain element, e.g. in translating CERL into learning outcomes.
Community partners	As (1) resource persons in LCs: guest speakers, workshop contributors, co-facilitators, (2) sites/fields for LC sessions (3) partners in CERL projects with 1 or more lecturers (4) advisory board members guiding professional development processes	Common & Varied	All LC processes involved community partners as a key element in working toward the community engagement goal and providing lecturers with the opportunity to meet them. Their involvement varied in terms of type, frequency (from 1 to all LC sessions) and duration (for specific parts of the sessions). 2 of 4 LCs were supported by advisory boards involving stakeholders.
Students, alumni	As (1) resource persons in LCs: guest speakers, workshop contributors about student experience with CERL (2) advisory board members	Varied	Some of the LC processes involved 1 or more students for 1 or more/all sessions, but this was not a general characteristic across the LCs.
University management	As (1) resource persons: guest speakers about context, strategy and policies for CERL, (2) advisory board members	Common & Varied	In most LC processes university management was invited to set the scene for CERL and/or provide a contextual motivation for launching CERL projects. Their level (e.g. Head of Department, Dean, Vice-Rector) and input point (beginning or close to the end of process) varied.

Appendix 2. Concept-map linking Learning Circles design principles, professional learning space dimensions, and resulting elements of professional growth. (Source: authors).